THE GENRE ART OF FAIRFIELD PORTER

Bonnard's art lies outside the mainstreams of development of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; so does Vuillard's; and so today does Fairfield Porter's. Such painters do not lead the art of their time in new directions. They demonstrate a regard for tradition and for the appearance of the world, yet they paint so well that they command the respect of all serious artists and critics. The two Frenchmen ultimately came to be ranked more highly than many of the more avant-garde members of their generation, and history may well render a similar judgment in the case of the American painter.

Porter fully understands and appreciates the movements and styles proliferating in the present, for in addition to being a painter he is a serious and intelligent critic of contemporary art. He remains independent of all movements however, and takes from traditional art whatever he can use. Thus, it is almost in spite of himself that his art seems to be somewhat related to two contemporary movements--although with very important differences in both cases.

The figurative painters from the Bay area in California--Diebenkorn, Bischoff, and others--are clearly related to Porter in their use of figurative subjects worked in a broad, flat, painterly technique and composed with a clear-cut spatial order. In general, however, the West Coast artists tend toward a generalized treatment of their subjects, while Porter's is individualized and intimate. There is also a spirit of loneliness and anxiety about many of these artists works that is completely absent from Porter's happier mood.

"Pop" artists like Lichtenstein, Warhol, and Thiebaud also use figurative subjects taken from the middle-class, American environment. They usually deal with images from the commercial side of this culture however, and their attitude is "cool" and "hip," often resulting in an implied ironical and satirical criticism. When Porter paints a still-

The ideal can be explained, but presence can only be experienced. You can completely define the immaterial, but what is at hand escapes translation. Science ex--plains--that is, translates and reduces--to give you a substitute for experience. The scientific prejudice dismisses the difference.

—Fairfield Porter
from "Art and Knowledge" published in Art News, February, 1966

Fairfield Porter was born in Illinois in 1907. He attended Harvard College, where he majored in art history. Later he studied with Thomas Hart Benton and Boardman Robinson at the Art Students League. He has followed a career as an art critic as well as a painter. For seven years he was editorial associate for Art News. *He wrote an important monograph on Thomas Eakins and he has had many of his poems published.*

life with a carton of homogenized milk and a loaf of sliced bread he is not attempting to communicate an idea or point of view about the culture that produced both the objects and the slick commercial images of them. As with the French *Intimist* painters, the "furniture" and style of middle-class life simply provide the motifs for his formal compositions. His painting is not involved with ideas about the vulgarity and banality of this particular world. It is concerned with light, space, color, and an image of quiet well-being that seems close to the austere genre art of Vermeer and Ter Borch as well as to that of the French *Intimists*.

Girl with Forsythia, for example, recalls a familiar image from the paintings of Ter Borch: a female figure standing quietly in a three-quarter view next to a chair. In both instances the remote, level gaze, as well as the severe frontal composition, seems to close the spectator out, forcing him to remain psychologically outside the space created by the artist. More like Vermeer's, however, Porter's figure compositions in interior spaces are usually filled with light.

Landscapes such as *The Fields in May, The Garden Road,* and *The Wheelbarrow* are literally flooded with light. It is not an effect achieved with the Impressionist technique of juxtaposing patches of color; it is accomplished instead by relating broadly painted, heavily pigmented areas which define a clearly articulated space and at the same time establish a decorative pattern on the canvas surface. For example, the palpable, irregular shapes of the light colors in the foliage of the trees and on their trunks in *The Garden Road,* or the flat, parallel planes which define the fields, foliage, and sky in *The Fields in May* work, almost paradoxically, both in a two-dimensional and three-dimensional way.

Although Porter's art is in various ways related to the older painters mentioned above, its directness, anti-artiness and understatement in dealing with every day subjects is perhaps even closer to such American painters as Winslow Homer, and especially Thomas Eakins. He goes further than Eakins, however, in simplifying his compositions and restraining the feelings that they inspire. He is above all a painter who relies on his eye and sense of "presence" ahead of his emotions or his considerable intelligence.

Girl with Forsythia

The Wheelbarrow

Boats and Island, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches, 1965, lent by Tibor de Nagy Gallery.

Dinner Table, oil on canvas, 48 x 34 inches, 1965, lent by Olga Roebling.

The Fields in May, oil on canvas, 28 x 22 inches, 1962, lent by Friends of Art, Uniontown, Pennsylvania.

The Garden Road, oil on canvas, 62 x 48 inches, 1962, lent by Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Gift of the Greylock Foundation.

Girl with Forsythia, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches, 1960, lent by Mr. and Mrs. Wilfred P. Cohen.

Green Landscape, oil on canvas, 16 x 32 inches, 1963, lent by Mr. and Mrs. A. I. Caplow.

Katie and Anne, oil on canvas, 80 x 62 inches, 1955, lent from the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Collection.

The Living Room, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches, 1964, lent by (Mrs.) Constance C. Jewett.

The Mirror, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches, 1966, lent by Paul Roebling.

Morning Landscape, oil on canvas, 80 x 80 inches, 1965, lent by Susan and David Workman.

The Porch Door, liquitex on canvas, 24 x 20 inches, 1962, lent by Marjory M. Turon.

Rhododendron on Table, oil on canvas, 20 x 17 inches, 1957, lent from the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Collection.

Self Portrait, oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches, 1948, lent by Mr. Rael Gleitsman.

Stephen and Kathy, liquitex on canvas, 60 x 48 inches, 1963, lent by Tibor de Nagy Gallery.

Still Life with Standing Figure, oil on canvas, 45 x 45 inches, 1964, lent by Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Norman.

Street in Spring, oil on canvas, 22 x 28 inches, 1961, lent by Tibor de Nagy Gallery.

University Place, oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches, 1960, lent by Woodward Foundation.

The Wheelbarrow, oil on canvas
lent by Mr. and Mrs. Robert White.